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EXCLUSIVE VIDEO: VIOLENCE INSIDE RIKERS

By Jennifer Gonnerman

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Violence Inside Rikers

In May, 2010, Kalief Browder, a sixteen-year-old high-school sophomore, was arrested in the Bronx for allegedly stealing a backpack. He insisted that he was innocent, but he was taken to Rikers Island, New York City's four-hundred-acre jail complex. Browder spent the next three years at Rikers, awaiting trial while his case was repeatedly delayed by the courts. In May, 2013, the case against him was dismissed. (Last fall, I wrote about Browder for the

magazine.) This week, *The New Yorker* obtained two surveillance-camera video clips that depict the dual horrors of Browder's years in jail: abuse by a guard and by fellow-inmates.

September 23, 2012: Inside the Bing

Browder spent a total of about two years in solitary confinement, including nine months leading up to the incident shown in the video above, which took place inside Rikers's Central Punitive Segregation Unit, better known as the Bing. On this day, a guard came to Browder's cell door to escort him to the showers. As the footage shows, Browder put his hands through a slot in the door to be cuffed. The guard opened the door and began leading him down the tier. In the video, Browder appears to speak to the guard, who then threw him to the ground.

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Browder recently saw this footage for the first time. "I just felt him tighten a grip around my arm," he recalled, referring to the guard. "In my head, I was wondering why he tightened it so tight, like he never usually does, and that's when he swung me and kept trying to slam me." Browder says that, when a captain arrived, the guard explained that Browder had tried to run. "I was on the floor going crazy: 'He's lying! I didn't do nothing!'"

Browder said that he was punished for this incident with extra days in solitary confinement. Usually, an inmate is taken to an administrative hearing before he is given extra time in solitary. "If I would've went to Bing court," he said, "I would've told them to look at the camera, and they would've seen I didn't do anything. After that happened, to be honest, I was scared to come out of my cell to get in the shower again, because I felt, if I come out of my cell and he slams me again, then I'm going to get more box days."

A Department of Correction “injury to inmate” report says that Browder was “involved in a use of force” with “D.O.C. staff” that day, and that he suffered a facial contusion. A report from Browder’s subsequent visit to a medical clinic gives two explanations for the contusion: one is an “alleged attack by staff” and the other is “hitting his face into the shower wall,” which Browder says did not happen. When told that a guard had slammed Browder to the floor, a D.O.C. spokesperson sent a written statement: “DOC takes such allegations seriously, and we are looking into this claim, which occurred prior to Commissioner [Joseph] Ponte’s arrival at the department.”

October 20, 2010: At the jail for teen-age boys

Last year, the office of Preet Bharara, the United States Attorney for the Southern District, released a report denouncing the horrific conditions in the adolescent jail on Rikers, describing it as a place that “seems more inspired by *Lord of the Flies* than any legitimate philosophy of humane detention.” Browder experienced this firsthand during the many months he was held there.

In the fall of 2010, Browder, who was seventeen years old at the time, found himself assigned to a housing unit that was ruled by a gang. He was not a member of the gang, and on October 20, 2010, he recalls, a gang leader spit in his face. He decided that he needed to retaliate. If he had not, he said, it would have “meant they could keep spitting in my face. I wasn’t going to have that.”

That night, at 10:55 P.M., shortly before the guards were about to lock the inmates in their cells, Browder punched the teen-ager who had spit at him. Four surveillance cameras recorded this incident and its aftermath: a drawn-out beatdown of Browder by about ten other teen-age inmates. The Department of Correction’s official paperwork characterizes this incident as “a multiple inmate fight.”



Jennifer Gonnerman joined The New Yorker as a staff writer in 2015. She received a 2021 National Magazine Award for her article “Survival Story,” about a New York City bus operator.

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